Herschel Floyd died at about 3:00 on Saturday October 21, .1989. His death was another reminder of the transitory nature of the Floyd family even in the face of a seemingly unchanging landscape and way of life.

Herschel had farmed land in the Bleckley County and Houston County part of Georgia for all of his life. Toward the age of retirement in 1976 he had become disenchanted with the life of a farmer with all the variables of weather and market and in a time of rebellion at the system had sold all his land and equipment in order that his son, Jerry would not have the opportunity to follow him into this volatile occupation. Jerry, his only son, had always drained of farming and one wonders what this drastic move did to his hopes and dreams.

For the last fifteen years of his life, Herschel lived across the road from the home in which he was raised. He and Annie Wemberly, his wife, built a three bedroom ranch style home beneath some pecan trees and adjoining the pond where his mother, also known as Annie, had loved to fish. And at the time of his death, Herschel left a full barn of antique farm implements and at least four cars in need of various amounts of repair. The cars were purchased for his grandchildren, Jason and Lance who were age eleven and nine in 1989. In addition to the tool collection, Herschel left a very impressive collection of iron wheels, which Jerry said were the result of years of combing the countryside looking for them. They sit in all there round symmetry resting against an ancient tree adjacent to the pond. They were Herschel’s passion. Early pictures of Herschel’s house show that he even had some of the wheels welded together to form a very long fence, but evidently he tired of the fence for at the time of his funeral for fence had been disassembled and the sections were propped together against a tree and since the grass was not mowed too close to this pile, the trees had started to grow up around and in between the fence sections starting to form a new grove of trees encircling the former fence. Somehow things which were once important somehow become less important and eventually nature reclaims our things.

The family of Herschel Floyd gathered at the funeral home in Cochran on the bright clear afternoon of Sunday October 22, 1989. They assembled with the grand children, Jason and Lance to sit with the body and to receive friends who came to call. Herschel’s body was laid out in ebony colored casket with grand silver handles. He lay there in splendor such, as he had never known in life. His burial suit was dark and with his strong Roman nose one would have thought him to be a prosperous banker or well-known businessman rather than the disappointed farmer that he was. Annie would break into sobs from time to time and Jerry sat looking close to tears most of the afternoon. The grandchildren looked vaguely uncomfortable as though they would rather be out in the yard throwing a ball, but yet aware that this was a turning point in their lives and something requiring different and even adult behavior. Lance, sat in the chair with his feet not touching the ground and his too-short pants pulled up his leg absently sucking his thumb. This very act seemed to express the insecurity he felt very much as did the stuttering speech of his older brother Jason. One could only feel sorrow that these uncomfortable times has been thrust into the memories of these two Floyd boys for the sight of their beloved grandfather lying waxen in the silver and black coffin would always be with them. One only hopes is will not harm them.

Annie, who had been so faithful to Herschel all his life continued to be the same even at his death. She had been through the trying ordeal of his last illness and the gnawing pain of many years of failing health in addition to the

almost half century of life with a difficult man. Still, her concern at this time of death was one of love and care for Herschel. From time to time she would rise from her chair and walk to the coffin to gaze lovingly at the body and even touch and caress the cold and lifeless hand. Was she just accustomed to the cold and lifelessness because that is the was Herschel had always been? Or, was she caressing a hand now that she had not been allowed to touch in life? As always, she was concerned that Herschel looks good and her parting remark to the funeral director was a request for some more color to be added to Herschel's cheeks before the next viewing. She loved the man and wanted others to see the good in him and love him too. She remarked to many a visitor, "Doesn't he look like himself?"
Sunday afternoon at the funeral home brought a variety of mourners to visit the Floyd family. There were old family friends and even two Negro men who had worked for Herschel on his farm for many years. Even a few distant relatives who only made appearances at such gatherings stopped by. Among them was a man named Noble who is the grandchild of Aunt Sis paid his respects? He was a wiry, leathery looking man dressed in well-worn denim and sporting a two-day beard. He looked a bit like a drifter and from later conversation it seemed that was nearly accurate. He arrived on his motorcycle and his whole appearance was that of a man who lives outdoors almost like one of the street people found in large cities. He does have a home in Cochran but no one seems to know his means of support. He declared himself to be 54 years old with the same emphasis that is generally reserved for a declaration of survival by a disaster victim.

Back at Annie and Herschel's home Sunday afternoon the mood was more one a leisurely family reunion. If fact, the whole event would turn out to be more meaningful than most family reunions with more time spent in conversation and with the closeness of the old home place that acted as the backdrop to the stage. The afternoon was one of those golden and blue days that only October can bring. The sun was warm and the leaves just beginning to color and drop. It was a day to remember life and goodness and fullness as well as a day to remember the coming of winter and death and endings. The family gathered all afternoon on this beautifully lit stage in from of the place that Annie and James Edward Floyd had built so many years ago. There was even a sense that James E.Floyd was present again in the form of his grandson, Wayne Floyd.

Wayne Floyd carries so many of the Floyd traits. He has the same round face of his grandfather and the same super slim and wiry frame even at middle age. His skin has taken on the same creases around the back of the next that are the result of years in the hot sun tending the fields. Wayne now owns the old home place and he and his wife have fixed it up to look prettier than it ever look originally. They are even talking of putting in a hot tub out beside the old well. Wayne is a gentleman full of sensitivity and anxious to show off the new floors in his home. Floors that are made from the weathered wood taken from the next house up the road, a house that once held the Floyds while there new one was under construction and one that most recently held the black lady who helped Annie Floyd,

Wayne so graciously takes his truck back into the piney woods behind the house. It is an experience to be savored. To ride on the back of a pick up truck on such a glorious day, and to see the sights and smell the smells of logs burning and pine needles falling makes one know why this land has been so dear to generations of Floyds and to the Indians before them. The sandy soil has been turned countless times by generations of farmers and these farmers themselves are aware that the Indians were here first for with every turning they come

across countless arrowheads made by the Indians who resided along Shellstone creek. There are so many that one comes to think this might have been a factory for the manufacture of spear points and arrowheads. Surely at night the piney woods and banks along the creek are spirited with the ghosts of these Indians and perhaps even with a few of the early white settlers.

It is an afternoon full of light and full of laughter and conversation. Old ties are renewed and strengthened. It is an afternoon that will seal the bonds of the family that will continue for so many more years. It is a time when the young come together to hear stories of the past. Jason and Lance sit on chairs in the yard listening to family stories. Will they one-day retell these stories like those of their ancestor's have been told? Surely this is the tie that binds us together and Herschel in his unknowing way has provided a vital link.

Herschel was an unlikely man to be called a vital family link for he was an insensitive person who constantly demanded things and sought to dominate. He has even been called cruel and mean. Yet, it was to Herschel that was born the two grandchildren who would be the only male heirs to the Floyd name. Herschel was chosen to be the tangible link between the past and the future. His grandchildren would adore him and know only the goodness in him much as J.E. Floyd's grandchildren would not know the harshness in him, but would only be aware of his gentleness. Herschel in retirement bought the land across the road from the homeplace and later his son and grandchildren would buy adjoining acreage and by these actions ensure that the Floyd family would be rooted even longer in the sandy soil of middle Georgia. One can forgive Herschel his faults when the largeness of the picture is in view. He was stubborn, but this stubbornness served to create deep roots for the family.
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Herschel's funeral was scheduled for 11:00 A.M. on Monday morning. Again, the day dawned splendid. By 10:00 the long black hearse was parked in front of the funeral home with the driver sitting astride the hood taking in the sun. Markers for traffic saying "Funeral" were in place along the street and at the intersections. It was a scene worthy of a diplomat's arrival at the U.N. and Herschel Floyd would have a leave taking ceremony that was destined for long memory in the minds of his grandchildren. They would remember him as a king who died nobly in battle and was duly honored by his subjects.

The family gathered in the yard at the home with all the cars lined up for the procession to town to honor the man. There was an air of festivity and anticipation among the mourners fueled by the gloriousity of the day and the sense of oneness in being together again. There were gathered in the yard all those children of recent memory now grown up and gone away. Children who once had played together just as Jason and Lance played together under the Pecan trees yesterday. All these grown children are completely aware of the swift passage of their lives and being in this place together makes it more vivid. There is Denny Dykes looking prosperous and mature with bi-focal glasses. The same Denny who appears in family movies sitting in a high chair with a chicken bone in his hand. Of course there is Wayne, looking like his grandfather, the farmer, but with a sense of the today in his mind. This is the Wayne who commented that by today's standards were all abused children. This remark prompted reminiscences of peach switches and the punishment of having to find one's own switch when punishment was imminent. There are the Albert Floyd girls, Cookie and Gwen looking like twins very exotic with their olive

complexions and coal dark hair. Morris Floyd and his father Buddy arrive in their dark pin-strip suits looking more like undertakers than the actual undertaker who wears a light grey suit. Morris looks more and more like his father and naturally will one day be the patriarch of this family. And, just to complete the picture is Aunt Trudy who in her state of Alheizmer's disease rotates between recognition and forgetfulness with no apparent boundary. You are never sure if you are talking to her when she is in or out. She looks so healthy and normal, but must be watched constantly like a child.

To give the gathering a bit of the 80's it is only necessary to glance at the cars parked in the yard. There are the usual Fords and Chevy's, but there are also the sports cars of the today generation. Particularly, there is Sharon Dykes King who arrives in a grey Porsche. She look very much the prosperous today young woman, thin to a fault, well dressed and equipped with a diamond ring and a diamond tennis bracelet. This is a family that has developed from a simple farm family into one that is in touch with the world and full of liberated and productive women.

Mary, Laverne and Annette are all assembled and looking good. Mary and La Verne have just postponed a trip to California to be at the funeral. Perhaps the best looking of all is Aunt Shug who is 89 years old and still going strong. What memories are stored inside of her head and what sights have her eyes beheld?

The procession to the funeral is led by a police care with flashing lights and is respectfully slow. The train of cars leaves the yard and pass up the road in front of so many well-remember spots. It is a road that today is well paved and almost flat. In years gone past it was packed clay with steep ditches and some serious hills. In summer rains it was sometimes impassable because the water would cause the clay to become as slippery as ice. The procession arrives in orderly fashion at the funeral home and the cars are parked with care to insure that they will leave in the same order and with dignity. The occupants of the cars park, but remain in their cars until each door is opened for them by a member of the funeral home staff. Family members ranking from the nearest to the farthest
assemble at the foot of the stairs to the double funeral home doors. They hold hands. There is a moment of quiet and then the doors swing open and the organ music is allowed to drift out the door and down the stairs. The music creates its own counterpoint of soft sobbing and as one the crowd moves up the stairs and into the chapel. At this time in their lives, these simple people are like royalty with all the miniaturized trappings of pomp and ceremony.
The chapel is papered in shell-pink paper with a delicate floral border near the ceiling. Already there is a half a chapel assembled in the pews and the empty pews are reserved for the family. Annie, Jerry, Jason, Lance and Linda who upon arrival glance at the flower draped coffin and begins to weep as one occupy the first row.

The room itself is worth some description. In the center in front of the window with its closed draperies sits the coffin in its metallic onyx and silver splendor. It is truly an impressive creation and is topped by a perfectly made spray of red carnations. Its an impressive sight and worthy of a king and much beyond what anyone would think Herschel Floyd would feel comfortable with. In fact, one wonders what he must think of this proceeding. Hung about the room in no particular order or form are the floral tributes sent to Herschel and the family. They are all impressive and certainly costly, but some of the colors used in combination are coarse. They are mostly of a red these, but some are

combinations of red with the golden hues of autumn chrysanthemums and these strike a particularly jarring note to the shell pink background. Nonetheless, the coffin itself with the blanket of red is truly a sight to remember. It is positively regal.

The organist strikes up “Just a close Walk with Thee” and there is universal sobbing and reaching for Kleenex, but the scene is almost surreal when one remembers that the same tune is used for one of Herschel’s favorite ditties “Just a Bowl of Butter Bean”. How much more appropriate it would have been to sing the butter bean song for Herschel was not a particularly religious man. Perhaps the sobbing was over the juxtaposition of the songs and the details of Herschel’s final days that were soon to be mentioned in the eulogy.

The organ played very soft chords as the preacher told of Herschel’s final days. He did not tell details, but he was not there to white wash either. The preacher told us that some come early and some come late and that God shows no favor for those who labor only a short time in the vineyard. Obviously, the preacher wanted us to know that our impression of Herschel was true. He was a bit of a tyrant and this man of the cloth was the first to call a spade a spade. But, at the same time, he wanted us to know that there had been a crisis time while Herschel was in the hospital and that this time had been used to advantage to bring a soul home to Christ. No doubt the minister along with Annie and Jerry had reached through years of toughness and bluster and had brought a soul out and on its way to a final reward. We sitting in the chapel could only imagine the huge struggle that was no doubt the reason for the tears and sorrow of the wife and child. They were tears of relief for suffering ended. It was their suffering and Herschel’s suffering that was over. Perhaps there was that feeling of a job well done and sense of accomplishment that flavored their tears.

We in the room all knew without a doubt that a miracle was being recounted to us and we knew that we could be assured that Herschel would rest in peace. We all felt an enormous pride for the woman and child whose constancy had laid the seed bed for this death conversion. They were the real heroes of the day.

With the end of the eulogies, the male members of the family arose to bear the coffin out the door and we left the room and all the red slashes of floral tributes hung like Christmas decorations. The splendid coffin was loaded into the regal hearse and slowly, followed by an enormous snake of cars wended its way out of town to the cemetery.

The cemetery is set beside the road that goes from Cochran to Hawkinsville. The land is very flat and there is no shrubbery on the grounds of the cemetery. It resembled a fallow field with patches of garish flowers sprung up amongst the grasses and there like a naked body in the sunshine stood the grave with only a flimsy awning for cover and scrapes of various colored green Astroturf pulled up like a carelessly fastened collar around the hole in the earth. The older generation was allowed to occupy the chairs and the younger stood around as a guard. The coffin looked even more elegant out here in the open for its simplicity and the stark contrast of the red flowers
with the silver and grey developed more impact when stripped of the funeral home surroundings of soft pink punctuated with red slashes of floral tributes. Out here in the flat light of October surrounded

By the browning grass of autumn and the everlasting green of the piney woods, the casket came into its full grandeur. There was this sudden urge to say, Stop! Do not bury that beautiful object in the ground!

The universal Lord’s prayer ended the brief graveside service and then once again smiles and greetings broke the tension from relatives who had not seen each other in years and of reunited girlhood friends. Old ladies talked of how they played house in the dust of the front yards. And, as all gatherings do, this one lost its steam and gradually dissipated back to waiting cars and a slow exit from the burying ground. As if on cue there appeared workmen who had been hidden in the background. Slowly, trying not to be seen they walked toward the casket with shovels. They would complete their day’s works as soon as our backs were turned. Herschel would be planted in the soil of Georgia even before we would reach his home for the final hours together as a family.

We drive home the long way past the old places and the old fields and woods. It was a sparkling and perfect day and fresh air and active emotion had sharpened appetites. It is amazing how fast everyday life is resumed. It is almost as though sustained emotion is impossible. And travel back at Annie~ s house was filled with many hands filling glasses with ice and placing neighbor donated food in the microwave. Soon the table was filled with all the old peas, meats, and vegetables that for so many years have marked occasions of solemnity in these parts. The cakes and desserts re particularly notable. One wonders what the next generation will serve at its funerals. Will the generation of Sharon King so slim and trim and chic bring food like this? Hardly! Those who cook this way are vanishing with the family farm. The next generation will likely bring Sarah Lee cakes and Kentucky Fried Chicken and the world will be poorer for it. Cultures do change and some things are destined not to last.

As a family we owe gratitude to Uncle Herschel for his life. He gave the family males to carry the name forward. Her presence helped to give the family stability and place and his funeral was a touchstone to bind the family to one another and to announce to the grandsons that they are an important link. The funeral was an occasion of state for the family and young people does not easily forget such an event. It will always make Jason and Lance feel like they and their family are important.

We all hope that Aunt Annie, who is finally free of the domination will find a measure of peace and serenity and even some fun in what remains of her life for as we all agreed during the drive to the funeral home, there has never been a more giving person in the world than Annie Wemberly